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ABSTRACT

The impact of portfolio assessment, specifically writing portfolios, on the norms of classroom assessment practices were studied in two English Language Arts classes in a middle class suburban high school in the Los Angeles (California) area. Data were gathered through observations and interviews, and the examination of 25 student portfolios, with student reflections and teacher comments, and 56 student compositions regarding portfolios. Students maintained working portfolios all semester, and selected items for permanent inclusion at the end of each semester. Portfolios counted heavily for grades in both classes. Portfolios in these classes met the qualifying criteria, but no impact on assessment practice was discernible. A single significant criterion was apparent in both classes, and that was completion of the assignment on time. Neither quality of work nor student growth appeared to be a consideration. Both teachers expressed discomfort regarding assessment. Students generally expressed favorable attitudes toward portfolios, but most (9 of the 11 interviewed) viewed the teacher as the primary variable in determining grades. Findings suggest that even expert instructors may lack the awareness, knowledge, and skills to participate in professional assessment practices, particularly with portfolios. One graph and one chart illustrate the discussion. (SLD)

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Portfolios in Action: A Study of Two Classrooms With Implications for Reform

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
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Portfolios in Action:
A Study of Two Classrooms With Implications for Reform

This field study was an exploration into the impact of portfolio assessment, specifically writing portfolios, on the norms of classroom assessment practices in two English Language Arts classrooms, in a middle-class, suburban high school. The intent was to provide a snapshot of portfolio assessment in practice. Study findings resulted in the formulation of three propositions, presented below.

1. The culture of high school classroom assessment is complex and characterized by both explicit and implicit norms of behavior which, roughly translated, define the "rules of the game."

2. A single classroom innovation in assessment tends to shape itself to existing norms, rather than effectively altering those norms.

3. If reform efforts centering on assessment fail to deal explicitly with existing assessment norms, the chances for genuine change occurring are minimal.

This paper is divided into six parts: 1) Assumptions, definitions and limitations; 2) Summary of methodology; 3) A brief portraiture of two teachers and their classrooms; 4) Summary of data and findings; 5) Summary of propositions; 6) Implications.

Assumptions, Definitions, and Limitations

A initial assumption for this study was that a major shift in student assessment, as represented by implementation of portfolio assessment, will have a fundamental and observable impact on the culture of a high school English-Language Arts classroom. "Assessment" is used here to identify any part of the process or content used by a teacher to evaluate student progress and to report that evaluation (i.e. grading). The frame of reference for "classroom culture" or a "culture of assessment" is provided by the literature on organizational culture. "Culture" is defined, therefore, as the normative behavior of people in an organization, and the rules, written and unwritten which govern that behavior (Deal and Kennedy, 1981)

Portfolio assessment is defined here as the systematic collection of student work for the purpose of assessment and monitoring of student

progress. A consensus of current literature identifies the following characteristics as critical distinctions between portfolios and mere collections of student work:

- Portfolios include written, reflective responses by students, and usually teachers, regarding selected entries.
- Portfolio selections represent evidence of student performance on a range of performance-based, instructionally appropriate tasks, over time.
- Portfolios represent an exhibition of a student's best work, as determined by the student (Vavrus, 1990; Wolf, 1989).

This study is limited by its narrow focus, an examination of only two classrooms in a single high school in Southern California. No suggestion is made here that the findings are generalizable to other classrooms or other portfolio implementation efforts. Readers of this study are expected to be left with more questions than answers; such was the case with the researcher. Those of us intrigued with the potential of performance assessment need more than classroom snapshots; we are in search of detailed portrait of portfolios in action. One way for that picture to emerge, however, is via the study of one classroom at a time.

One more point is germane to this discussion. Despite the limitations of this study, some pertinent findings emerged. These findings guided the propositions which frame this paper. The reader is asked to consider the broader picture of assessment and the norms which have long characterized assessment practice. Pending the results of additional investigation which is in process, I suggest that existing norms transcend the type of assessment used and may have a significant impact on assessment reform.

Methodology

Subjects

Portfolio assessment is a relatively new innovation, at least in terms of formal practice. As such, it is subject to false clarity...a phenomenon accompanied by perceptions of change when none is occurring (Fullan, 1991). A primary consideration in this study, therefore, was to identify a teacher or teachers who were actually implementing portfolios, as defined above. A second criterion was that the teachers be recognized as effective instructors. The major subject of this study is an English Department Chairperson, a Fellow of the California Literature Project, and a presenter on the subject of portfolio assessment. The second teacher was strongly recommended by this department chair as an additional appropriate subject. The school is located in a suburban area of east Los Angeles County. It has a diverse ethnic population totals approximately 1600 students in grades 9-12. Ethnic distribution is approximately 40% Latino; 32% White; 23% Asia. Less than ten percent of the student body are limited English proficient, and the parental

education index, as reported by the 1990 California Assessment Program, was above the district and state average.

Data Gathering

Observations and interviews took place in three days over a two-week period and totaled 15 1/2 hours including eight hours of formal classroom observation of four different classes; two hours of informal classroom observation including informal interviewing of students and teachers; one hour of campus observation including the main office, library, hallways, and classrooms; and four and 1/2 hours of formal interviewing with the two teachers and 11 students. These interviews were audio taped, supplemented by my own notes. I transcribed each audio tape and coded transcriptions to isolate pertinent data regarding practice and perceptions of assessment.

I examined 25 student portfolios, selected at random from two classes, and summarized both the written student reflections and teacher responses. These data are supplemented by 56 student compositions regarding portfolios, which I analyzed, coded and categorized according to type of response. Graph I illustrates the frequency of responses by category.

Classroom Snapshots

Classroom Number One

The first-period seniors enter the class casually, chatting, directing comments to the teacher who responds casually. They settle into their seats which are arranged in nine clusters of four or five desks each. These groupings are rather awkwardly arranged, with students facing one another in an uneven, haphazard fashion. Only the observer seems conscious of the disarray. On the board is a message: "Welcome back, Mrs. C.....We Missed Our Favorite Teacher." classroom walls are lined, floor to ceiling, with student artwork, many skillfully done. I scan the room for evidence of student writing, finding none.

At the conclusion of three days of observation, the perception that this classroom is distinctive began to emerge. Students sit in groups always, whether engaged in independent work or a shared project. Artwork is assigned as one way for students to express their understanding of their reading. Expression of student opinion is continuously encouraged and validated; there are few "right" answers. "It is not my job to influence your views...it's not...you guys are practically adults. I think that the freedom I give you to say what you want to say is important, more valuable to one another than what I have to say," advised the teacher during a class discussion.

This teacher's rationale for becoming involved in portfolios is expressed in her own written reflection:

As I reflect on the whole business of portfolio assessment and

how I became interested, I marvel at the impact it has had on me and my students. When I first began thinking of portfolios, of course, I saw it as a way to handle the on-going paper load... ironically as it has turned out, I probably have more papers to grade now than I ever did.

Classroom Number Two

Mrs. D. teaches freshmen and sophomores. Her classroom is not unlike the other, and yet the differences are perceptible. As in the first classroom, student artwork covers three walls, and the student desks are arranged in clusters. Here, however, is a greater sense of balance and order. Every cluster includes four desks, in geometric squares. The artwork is identifiable by type: colorful crests depict familiar works of literature (e.g. A Separate Peace); mural-sized paintings cover the upper walls; collages depicting the "inner mind" of specific characters grade another wall. On the only counter is a box labeled "Writing Portfolios." Following introductions, the teacher comments to me, "You can see all kinds of authentic assessment."

This teacher's interest in performance assessment was sparked by the publishers of a music education textbook for which she is a contributor. "'We need you to find out about performance assessment,'" they told her. "'What is it? It seems that it's a trend right now, and we want to be on the cutting edge.'" Mrs. D. laughs as she relates this story. She did some research, wrote a section for the textbook, and when she was assigned English classes, decided "...to give this [portfolios] a try so that when I go out to do sessions on the book I can speak from first-hand experience."

Portfolios in Action

The logistics for portfolio compilation and assessment, as implemented in these classrooms, are outlined in Chart1. Briefly, students maintain working portfolios all semester; at the end of each semester they select previously assessed items for inclusion in their portfolios, following teacher guidelines. These guidelines provide students with considerable choice (.e.g. they are to select the best interpretive writing,the best narrative, tc.). Selected items are re-written, to exemplify the student's best writing. Students write a rationale for each selected piece and respond to the question, "What grade do you feel you deserve on this piece and why?" This process matches the criteria established in this study for identifying portfolio implementation: continuity, including work over time; inclusion of reflective responses by the student and teacher; representation of a range of writing tasks; samples of the student's best work as determined by the student. In classroom one, students are asked to include two pieces of writing from classes other than English; in the other, only English class assignments are included.

Although each writing piece was graded when initially assigned, the portfolios count heavily in each class. One-third of student semester grades are based on the portfolio for Mrs. C.'s seniors; other criteria include

individual assignments, group art assignments, and, as necessary, points awarded for being to class on time. Portfolios account for one-fifth of student semester grades in Mrs. D.'s class. In addition to assessing student products, Mrs. D. encourages student participation by awarding points, and completion of homework by giving it a high point value.

Mrs. C. said, "I don't grade things, I 'point' it, and comment. I dislike putting number values on papers, anyway." On one student's assignment, she wrote, "I hate putting points on these journals--to give them a numerical value offends me--but, it is part of the 'game' I get to play in this facet of my role." An examination of 16 portfolios, selected at random, received "perfect" scores of 420 points and general comments of a positive nature (e.g. "touching," "honest," "enjoyed"). The other two portfolios received 300 and 350 points, respectively. Comments indicated that work was incomplete, missing, or received late.

Mrs. D. explained how she has learned to address the process of assessment:

> Grading bothers me...I really don't like to have to put a number or a stamp of approval on each student. I really don't know how to do the assessment thing. You know part of the way I found out? I found out based on the kids' responses. I'd hand back a paper, and they'd say, 'Fifty points, is that an A?' When I realized they were expecting more than they got, I'd say 'now wait a minute am I grading realistically?' If this student feels he's one of the better ones and all of a sudden he's getting a message from me that he's not one of the better ones, I may be off. Maybe I'm expecting more than is realistic, so I began to read the kids--had to know if I was playing the 'game' the way they were used to having it.

Eight portfolios elected at random had a point range of 188-200, with 200 being the total possible. Comments were brief, "shows improvement," "minor errors," "neatly done." The "outlyer" was awarded 147 points; it was incomplete.

Summary of Findings

The implementation of portfolios in these classes met the qualifying criteria; however, no impact on assessment practice was discernible. In each classroom, portfolios represented a significant percentage of the course grade, one third and one fifth of the total points possible per class. Observation, analysis of student portfolios, and interviews with both teachers revealed that a single significant criterion for assessing the portfolios was apparent: completion of assignment, on time. Neither quality of work nor evidence of student growth appeared to be a consideration. Each teacher expressed discomfort regarding assessment, and in separate instances, referred to assessment as a "game." Grading student work was an independent task for

each teacher, conducted alone.

Students generally expressed favorable attitudes toward portfolios. Ten of the 11 students interviewed supported continued use of portfolios; only three strongly negative responses appeared in the 58 student essays. The most frequent specific comment was, "It helped my grade." None of the students expressed strong ownership of their portfolios; portfolios from the past semester lay unclaimed in each classroom.

Asked, "How are you graded in this class? How are portfolios graded? How does this grading system compare to grading in other classes?," a consistent theme emerged among student responses: "It depends on the teacher." Nine of the 11 interviewees identified the teacher as the primary variable in determining grades.

Propositions

A Culture of Assessment

The first proposition presented in this paper was that "the culture of high school classroom assessment is complex and characterized by both explicit and implicit norm of behavior which roughly translate into "'rules of the game.'"

Each of the teachers in this study referred to assessment as a "game." Among the game rules made explicit in this study is the rule of "leverage," using assessment as an incentive to encourage behaviors not strictly academic. The only factor significantly affecting the points awarded 25 randomly-selected portfolios, was completion of the assignment, on time. Both teachers acknowledged their concern with completion of assignments and their use of incentives. Mrs. C expressed regret that "portfolios could save" students who had not worked throughout the semester; as a result, portfolios will "count less" next year. Mrs. D. increased the amount of points for homework to encourage completion and awarded points for class participation. Students' personal reflections and self assessments appeared to have no impact on points awarded.

A second rule is the rule of teacher control, identifying the high degree of power and autonomy surrounding the practice of assessment. Students who were interviewed clearly perceive this autonomy, translating it to "it depends on the teacher." Teacher autonomy in assessment is a norm of professional practice protected in California by the State Eduction Code. The teacher's right to grade is nearly inviolate; only in the event of proven fraud or clerical error may a grade be changed by anyone other than the teacher (California Education Code Update, 1991). This is a protection which assumes professional expertise.

Some may contend that more objective forms of assessment, specifically

traditional tests and measures, are less teacher dependent. In deference, if not agreement, to those who would so argue, this proposition is limited to circumstances in which assessment involves a high degree of subjectivity, specifically performance assessment.

Portfolios as Assessment

The second proposition asserts that "a single classroom innovation in assessment (e.g. portfolios) tends to shape itself to the rules of the current 'game,' rather than effectively altering those rules."

Portfolios have been addressed here as an assessment innovation and as an example of performance assessment. In this study, I searched in vain for evidence of portfolio assessment affecting assessment practice. Portfolios counted significantly in terms of student grades; in other words, their high point value made them significant points of "leverage." Grades used for leverage, however, reinforce existent norms, rather than alter them.

The process for grading portfolios in these classrooms was consistent with the norm of teacher autonomy and control of assessment. Quality standards for portfolios were not identified nor was any other standard for assessment expressed. No rubric was used. Each teacher graded the portfolios individually and privately. Criteria for grading were not shared. Furthermore, quality standards for portfolios were not identified, nor was any other standard for assessment evident. No rubric for assessment was used. The students' observations appear correct. Grades truly do depend on the teacher.

These two classrooms were the only instances of portfolio assessment at this Southern California high school. The remaining teachers in the English department have declined even the opportunity of examining the portfolios of incoming students. Should an entire school, or even an entire department, were to implement portfolio assessment, the chances for effecting real change in the norms of assessment might be enhanced. The involvement of more teachers may increase the chance of assessment emerging from the shroud of secrecy and becoming a topic of professional discourse.

Portfolios and Reform

The final proposition asserts, "if reform efforts centering on assessment fail to deal explicitly with existing assessment norms, no real change is going to occur."

Successful implementation of performance assessments will require significant shifts in assessment norms. Changing the kinds of assignments given to students (e.g. assigning students to maintain portfolios), is not sufficient. Unlike traditional forms of assessment, performance assessment requires professional judgment based on standards of quality established by practice, research, and professional collaboration. Critics of assessment reform point to the reliance on teacher judgment as a weakness of

performance assessment. "Judgment" in the new paradigm,must be based on established standards of quality, standard which reflect best practice, research, and professional collaboration. Otherwise, the critics will be proven correct.

The findings in this study suggest that teachers may be ill prepared to participate in professional assessment practices. Two very effective and reflective instructors, as evidenced by classroom observation and interviews, expressed discomfort and dislike of assessment. Furthermore, an examination of their assessment practices suggest that this discomfort, and evident lack of preparation, translates itself into behaviors which severely limit their assessments as indices of what students know, understand, and can do.

Changing the kinds of assignments given to students does not necessarily change assessment practice. If we persist in assessment practices which protect the teacher-centered focus and support teacher isolation of the present at the expense of establishing professional standards of performance, assessment reform is unlikely.

Implications

Portfolio assessment is examined in this study within the context of assessment reform, reform which is designed to provide evidence of what students know, understand, and are able to do. The "high stakes" value of some traditional testing has resulted in a strong influence on classroom instruction, in effect limiting instruction in ways unintended (Shepard, 1989). Increasingly, researchers and policy makers are advocating a move to performance assessment as an alternative to traditional pencil and paper tests (Shepard, 1989; Wiggins, 1992), a move which will make tests "worth teaching to" (Carlson, 1990, p.1).

Wiggins (1992) calls assessment reform the "Trojan horse of real school reform" (p.33). Shepard (1989) and Archbald and Newman (1990) also present arguments supporting the view that performance-based assessment can be a tool "of" and "for" reform in educational practice. This perspective has many implications for the role of the classroom teacher.

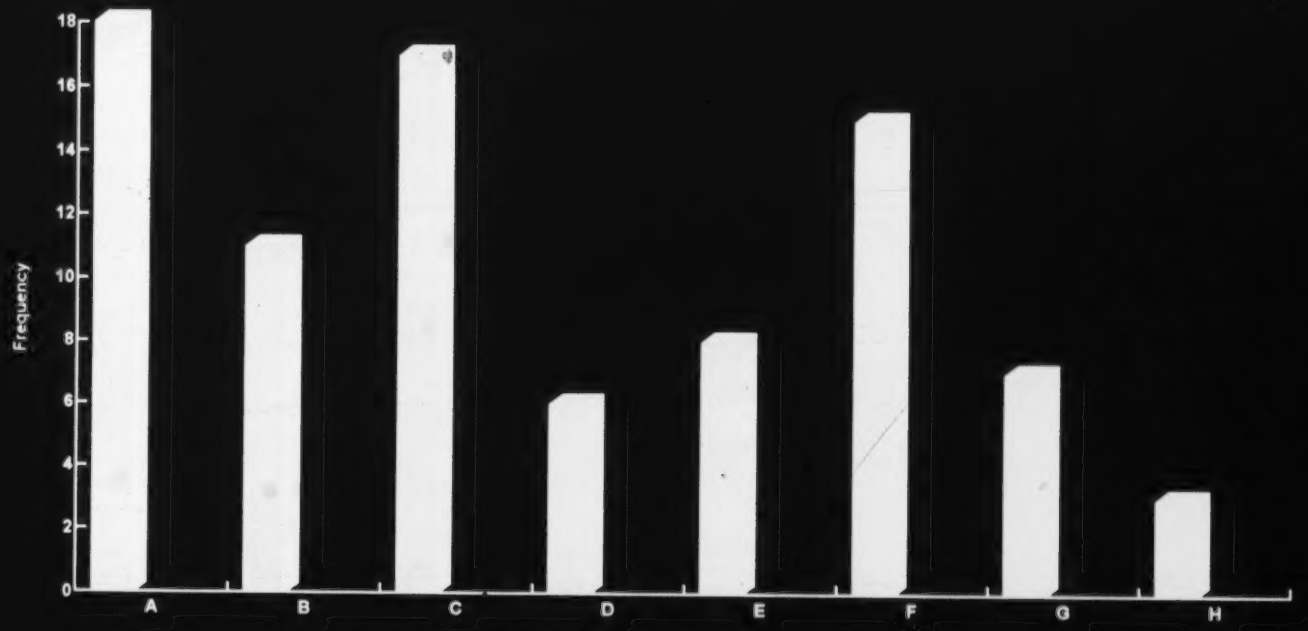
How prepared are teachers to conduct effective assessment? The findings in this study suggest that even expert instructors may lack the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to participate in professional assessment practices. A rationale connecting lack of teacher preparation to assessment practice is presented by Jett and Shafer (1992) who assert, "A crucial factor to the success of K-12 educational reform seems to be the knowledge and skill levels of classroom teachers related to classroom and other forms of assessment" (p.6). Jett and Shafer postulate that the lack of formal teacher training in classroom assessment activities and the failure of certification requirements to address assessment competence as a requisite for teaching may account, in part, for the lack of teacher skills in assessment.

Questions for further research go beyond examining the implementation of portfolio assessment and include the entire realm of assessment norms. To what degree are the norms identified here characteristic of secondary assessment practice? How are assessment norms affected when entire departments or schools take on the challenge of new forms of assessment? What kinds of processes support, or hinder, reform in assessment? What kinds of norms characterize assessment reform? Are teachers receiving the kind of training and experiences needed to make then effective assessors?

In an effort to address some of these questions, I have designed two follow-up questionnaires on assessment practice which were distributed in March, 1993, to a sample of secondary English teachers and students. The purpose of these surveys is to confirm or reject the findings regarding assessment norms suggested by the data in this study.

GRAPH 1

WRITTEN RESPONSE BY GRADE 12 STUDENTS TO TEACHER ASSIGNED PROMPT ON PORTFOLIO
N = 53

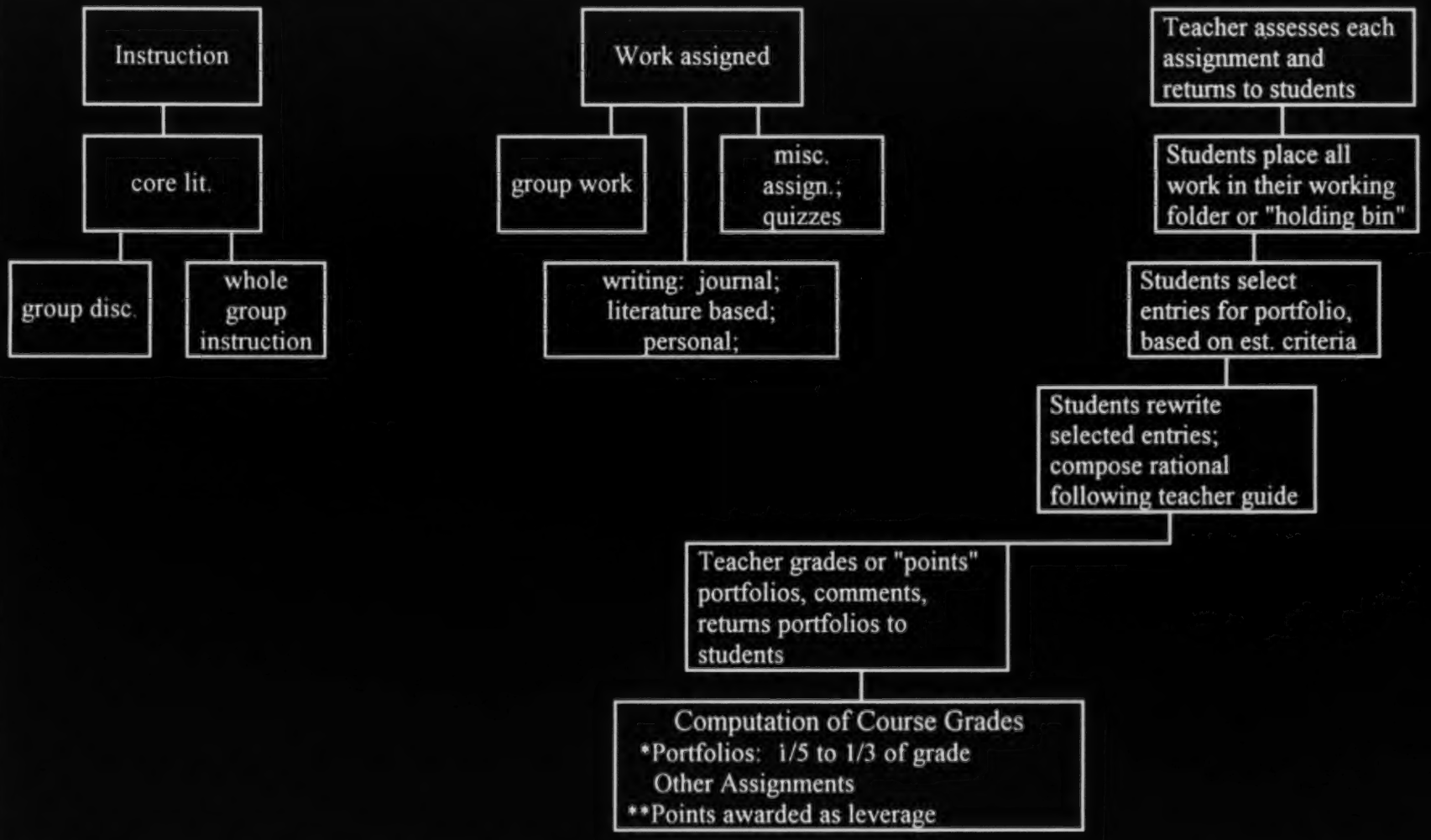


Type of Response

A. General positive comments e.g. "great," "enjoyed"
B. "Helped my grade"
C. Learned "about self"
D. Learned about writing
E. Better than a test, report project
F. Wished had begun collecting work in an earlier grade
G. Problems with logistics: time; "hard to choose"
H. Negative, "boring," "not useful

CHART 1

FROM INSTRUCTION TO ASSESSMENT


Instruction
core lit.
group disc.
whole group instruction
Work assigned
group work
misc. assign.; quizzes
writing: journal; literature based; personal;
Teacher assesses each assignment and returns to students
Students place all work in their working folder or "holding bin"
Students select entries for portfolio, based on est. criteria
Students rewrite selected entries; compose rational following teacher guide
Teacher grades or "points" portfolios, comments, returns portfolios to students
Computation of Course Grades
*Portfolios: 1/5 to 1/3 of grade
Other Assignments
**Points awarded as leverage

*Class A: 33 1/3 % of total grade
Class B: 20% of total grade

**Used in class A to encourage participation and completion of tasks; in class B to encourage being on time, and completion of tasks

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